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Lahontan Cutthroats Booming At Lake Lenore

By Brad Wood

Fishermen's dreams are made of this—a trophy three- to over eight-pound cutthroat trout, held tenuously by a fly or lure with barbless hook, stripping line off with a whining reel. It doesn't take a once-in-a-lifetime, expensive, guided trip to some far-off fishing mecca to live that dream, because it's almost in your own backyard!

Lake Lenore in Grant County can provide this trophy fishing experience and is within a few hours' drive of almost everyone in the state. Whether you are a lure plunker or a devout fly fisherman, Lake Lenore offers trophy cutthroat fishing and classic desert scenery to boot.

The lake is one of several lakes of the Grand Coulee carved by tremendous floods during glacial activity over 20,000 years ago. Today, it covers 1,400 surface acres with an average depth of 15 feet and maximum of 27 feet. The lake is home to a cutthroat trout fishery with growing nationwide appeal. Just eight years ago, there wasn't a game fish that could live in its highly alkaline waters. That has all changed after years of experimentation by Washington Department of Game fish biologists during their search to find a fish that could thrive and provide a new fishery.

That adaptable fish was and is the Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Salmo clarki henshawii*), one of three cutthroat subspecies now inhabiting Washington's waters, introduced from Pyramid Lake near Reno, Nevada.

Lahontan cutthroat in Lake Lenore range from three to over eight pounds. So far the official standing record is an eight-pound, one-ounce fish caught by an ice fisherman in January. Fish over 10 pounds have been observed by both fishermen and biologists.

Fishermen can distinguish the Lahontan cutthroat from other subspecies by its darker skin, cigar shape and fewer black spots along the body, most of them high on the back. Dr. David Galat, University of Arizona, has studied these fish for several years at Pyramid Lake and notes that, "Lahontans can live up to eight years. That's longer than the lives of most cutthroat trout. Not only that, but genetically, they are programmed for fast growth when appropriate food is available—two ideal attributes for a fishery."

Over 70,000 years ago, the ancestor of this modern cutthroat entered the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada. It became established in ancient Lake Lahontan, then the size of Lake Erie. Over thousands of years, the lake receded and became more and more alkaline. Some of



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these cutthroats survived and continued to live in Pyramid Lake, the last remnant of Lake Lahontan.

In the late 1800's, Pyramid lake was known for its commercial fishery of cutthroats up to 30 and 40 pounds. In 1925, a standing world record was set by a fisherman who landed a monstrous 41-pounder! But this unusual inland population of large Lahontans became extinct by 1940, victim of a dam on the Truckee River which blocked the trouts' access to spawning grounds.

Fortunately, some Lahontans managed to survive in the Carson River, a tributary of the Truckee. California Department of Fish and Game was able to take some of these survivors, propagate them and then restock them into Pyramid Lake. In the late 1970's, eggs taken from some of Pyramid's fish and hatched

in Washington formed the basis for the fishery in Lake Lenore

Soapy Water

The waters of Lenore are highly alkaline, with a pH of 10. Typical Columbia Basin lakes have a pH level of 8 to 8.5. The alkalinity of Lenore is from a high level of dissolved sulfate, bicarbonate, carbonate and chloride salts left behind from evaporation. There is no year-round outflow from the lake to drain them off. The waters of Soap Lake, just south of Lenore, are twice as alkaline and feel like slick soap when rubbed between your hands. When strong winds buffet the lakes, foamy suds may billow up along windward shores. Historically, the alkalinity was too high to support fish in either lake, but in recent years it has been decreasing due to increased seepage

of groundwater. Fresh water seeping into Lake Lenore, coupled with pumping out of water at the south end during summer, has helped lower the alkalinity, setting the stage for fish survival. Soap Lake continues to be void of fish due to extreme alkalinity.

Until 1977, no fish could tolerate the high alkaline conditions for very long; death was certain within a few weeks. But occasional monitoring of the lake's pH level by the Department of Game showed it was gradually lowering. This spurred renewed search for a game fish which might tolerate the new conditions.

Merrill Spence and Bill Zook, both former fish biologists in Ephrata, are credited with the pioneering efforts which led to initial establishment of Lahontan cutthroats in Lake Lenore.

How To Catch A Trophy Lahontan Cutthroat

With a little persistence, most fishermen can catch a trophy-size Lahontan cutthroat from Lake Lenore. The 1,400-acre lake is easily reached by Highway 17 just north of the town of Soap Lake. The Department of Game has provided two developed access sites along the east shore, each with parking areas, toilets and small boat ramp. Last year, they also developed a parking area at the extreme north end where fishermen congregate during spring. No camping is allowed on any of the publicly owned lands around the lake.

Lahontan cutthroats can be caught year-round but the best seasons are early spring, fall and winter. Ice-fishing has become popular from December through February and is very rewarding.

Anglers are reminded that this is a selective fishery allowing only one fish to be kept per day. Only flies or lures with single barbless hooks can be used. Barbs can be filed, ground or pinched down. If the barb snags when running the tip back and forth through a dense piece of fabric, it needs more work.

In the seven years of the fishery, fishermen have experimented with

just about every form of lure or fly. A few of each have emerged as proven fish-getters and no doubt more will be found in years to come. For lures, try a one-quarter to three-eighths ounce wobbling spoon, large Mepps or Roostertail spinner. Hammered brass or copper spoons painted with yellow, orange, or red stripes and green froggy-looking ones are favorites. They've also been caught on Flatfish, crappie and wall-eye jigs and Rapalas.

Lures can be cast from shore, a boat or trolled slowly by rowing or using an electric trolling motor. The trick is to get them down close to the bottom where Lahontans cruise and feed. If you're not raking the muck on the bottom occasionally, you are not deep enough. Good areas to begin fishing are off rocky slopes where the water is deep and food plentiful. During the spring, try the north and south ends where the cutthroat gather when trying to spawn.

Fly fishing for the big trout has become increasingly popular and very successful. Flies can be cast using conventional spinning gear with a bobber but they're more popularly cast with fly rod and reel. George Cook, professional fishing guide at

Lenore and the Columbia Basin in general, provided the following tips for both the beginning and expert fly fisherman.

Prime time to fish with flies at Lenore is March through the first week of May. Time of day appears to make little difference during this period. During this time, mature cutthroats head into shallow water in search of a place to spawn. These shallow areas are at the extreme north and south ends where a fly fisherman can get his flies in front of the fish near the bottom. In fall and winter, shallow areas can still be productive if fished early and late in the day.

A handful of fly patterns have proven successful at Lake Lenore: Black Leech, fluorescent green and orange Carey Specials, Black Wooly Buggers, Muddler Minnows and Sculpin patterns. Use a size four to six hook on most, going down to a size eight on Carey Specials when fished in very shallow water.

A sinking-tip fly line gets the fly near the bottom without the rest of the line tangling around your feet. Retrieval of the fly should be varied to match the trout's mood. Begin by stripping line in foot-long strips, varying the speed. Hip boots, waders, float tubes and small boats can all be used on both ends of the lake.

In 1977, Spence and Zook obtained 30 yearling Lahontans from Omak Lake in Okanogan County. Those fish, four to six inches long, were placed in live-boxes in Lake Lenore, then later released when it appeared they might survive. One year later, eight of the 30 were observed in various areas of the lake. This encouraged the biologists to pursue larger plants.

A potential trophy fishery was developing, but not without controversy surrounding the impact the fishery could have on the wildlife in and around the lake. Wildlife biologists in the same office as Spence and Zook took a different view of the budding fishery and voiced concerns about the impacts that could come from increased human use of the lake. Their primary concerns were for changes in the distribution and

abundance of waterbirds. Thousands of waterbirds such as ruddy ducks, common and Barrow's goldeneyes, eared grebes and common mergansers are attracted to the lake's abundant invertebrate food source.

Through long and heated debate, the fish and wildlife biologists hammered out a compromise that would allow establishment of the fishery yet provide protection for wildlife. To achieve this, biologists agreed that there would be no overnight camping and no gasoline powered engines allowed on boats. A year-round season was also put into effect to lessen the impact of huge crowds that an opening day type of season brings.

Wildlife biologists today agree these regulations have helped lessen impacts but, as they predicted, there has been a marked change in the abundance and distribution of waterbirds on the lake. No project can be undertaken without its positive and negative impacts on the resource.

To protect and promote the trophy status of the fishery, the lake is classified as a selective fishing water. This means that fishermen can hook and release as many of the cutthroats as they can fool, but they must stop fishing after killing one fish. A selective regulation also allows only use of barbless flies or lures and no bait. To keep noise and water pollution to a minimum, only electric trolling motors are allowed. Petroleum-powered motors may not even be attached to a boat in the lake.

Management of the Lake Lenore fishery is now in the hands of Foster and area fish biologist Steve Jackson. Foster and Jackson are keeping a watchful eye over the fishery to prevent disease outbreaks and detect any decline in productivity. So far, they say the Lahontan fishery continues to be a booming success.

A watery desert transformed into an excellent fishery—a dream fulfilled for both biologists and fishermen! Strong fighters providing good sport and tablefare, Lahontans are a worthy quarry for any angler. *WW*

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Once hooked, you can expect a big Lahontan to act like most cutthroats. It'll shake its head, roll a few times, act like a log and usually forego the cartwheeling antics of rainbows. No matter how you play them, be sure to keep constant tension on the line to keep them from shaking the barbless hook.

If you choose to release one, try not to handle it unless wearing wool gloves. Use of bare hands will remove too much protective mucous from the trout's body, allowing infection to set in. Carry a landing net so you can control the fish long enough in the water to remove the hook.

But many of you will decide to keep one of these big brutes, at least the first one and perhaps a succession of others. Sure, it would make a nice mount for the office or den but are they good to eat? Veteran Lenore anglers give a definite yes!

Every angler has his or her own idea of how Lahontans should be cooked and how they should taste. Some prefer baking, some frying, some smoking, it's up to you. Anglers who have consumed their weight in these fish claim they prefer them smoked but wouldn't snub a good baked one. Some say the trick to baking and good flavor is to remove the skin and any fat layer.

